

THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE - WASHINGTON AND ADAMS

Presidents Washington and Adams lived and worked in a house on this site from 1790 to 1800.

Here they established traditions and protocols that our presidents follow to this day.

The Washington Years

Washington moved into the President's House in November 1790, calling the elegant, three-story brick mansion the "best single house in the city." He remained in residence until March 1797. Washington assembled a household that consisted of about thirty people, including members of his own family, his personal staff and their families, some fifteen white servants, and at least nine enslaved Africans. Washington conducted the business of the Executive Branch from a small, second-floor office. During the time Washington served as the new nation's chief executive, and while he was living in the fine house in Philadelphia, the first ten amendments which make up the Bill of Rights were added to the Constitution; he also approved a national banking system to keep the country financially stable and proclaimed a policy of neutrality regarding American involvement in European affairs.

The issue of slavery plagued Washington throughout his years in Philadelphia. By the time that Washington arrived here, he had privately begun to express doubts about that institution, but he also expressed frustration with those who worked openly against slavery. Despite his misgivings about slavery, while living in the President's House, Washington signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. This notorious law mandated the return of enslaved persons to their owners and made it a crime to aid in the escape of the enslaved.



George Washington by Ellen Sharples. Collections of Independence National Historical Park.

Washington also took pains to ensure that those he enslaved could not secure their freedom under the terms of Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Law of 1780. Washington was unsure if the law applied to him, but if it did, it would have allowed the enslaved Africans he brought into the state to secure their freedom after six months residence in Pennsylvania. In order to keep this from happening, Washington secretly made arrangements for the slaves he brought to Philadelphia to be rotated out of the state before the six-month deadline arrived. Even a brief trip across state lines would restart the clock on the waiting period.

Washington eventually did decide to free his slaves. However, under the terms of his will, this belated freedom only came after both he and his wife had died, and then only for some. Martha's dower slaves, who legally belonged to her family's estate, were not freed.



Residence of Washington in High Street, Philad., by William L. Breton, c. 1830. Courtesy, Private Collection.

Archeological investigation of the President's House site is being conducted as a partnership between the City of Philadelphia and the National Park Service.

To learn more about the President's House visit: www.phila.gov/presidentshouse and www.nps.gov/inde



John F. Street, Mayor

URS



Mary A. Bomar, Director

The Adams Years

Upon his election to the presidency in March 1797, John Adams and his wife Abigail moved into the President's House. Adams, who never owned slaves, was a man of frugal habits and simple tastes. The President's House was a very different place during the years he lived there. In contrast to the relative pomp and splendor during Washington's administration, during the Adams presidency the house was a much more sedate place. President Adams ran his household along simple lines and he regularly under spent the funds allotted for state functions and entertaining. Large functions, such as those held on the Fourth of July, or the event Mrs. Adams hosted in December 1799 to mourn George Washington's passing, were relatively rare occurrences.

During his presidency, Adams led a deeply divided and increasingly partisan country. Tension and conflict grew as the new Republican Party openly challenged the Federalists, the established party to which Adams was allied. Foreign affairs brought turmoil, as well. Adams wrestled with the "XYZ Affair," a diplomatic crisis that very nearly plunged the new nation into war with France. Domestically, Adams' administration saw the ratification of the 11th Amendment to the Constitution, the creation of a national Navy, and the establishment of the Mississippi Territory, but also was roundly criticized for signing into law the controversial Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Adams left the President's House in May 1800, and moved into the White House in Washington, D.C.



John Adams by Charles W. Peale. Collections of Independence National Historical Park.